

Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition



Koffi Zoe Dogbevi was born in 1968 in Lome, the capital of Togo. He is a member of the Ewe tribe, which spans sections of Ghana, Togo and Benin along the Gulf of Guinea. Koffi taught drumming in the Apprenticeship Program. He describes it as “a home-based art developed and taught in our communities from childhood to interested children, by grandparents, parents and relatives. Whether you learn it or not depends on your house, on your parents.”

Koffi’s grandfather, Dogbevi Nukafu, was the first to settle the Nukafu area of Lome. As the chief, people would come regularly to visit, ask for access to land, and then farm. After a day of working in the fields outside Lome, people would gather to visit, sing and play drums. This is a key cultural activity for the Ewe and Koffi’s family took part. Koffi grew up in these daily sessions absorbing what he heard and saw. “You just grow up doing it and keep learning and then you know.”

As a young man, Koffi ran a body shop in Lome. Business was good because, being so close to the ocean, rust is a common problem. Up until this time, Koffi had been listening but not playing in public. One day, people were looking for someone to play the drums and they asked at his shop. He went and when he started to play, everyone was so surprised. They said, “Oh, we didn’t know you knew how!” He has maintained his talent for learning by ear.

Koffi says he plays “true traditional drumming” of the Ewe. He plays with enough skill that “I make everyone dance.” When he moved to Madison in 2005, he kept on playing, practicing regularly. He has connected with other Ewe in the area and they get together weekly at the Eagle Heights Community Center in Madison to drum, dance, clap and sing. They also play for entertainment at cultural festivals, funerals, marriages, birthdays, and other social gatherings.

Koffi had two apprentices, Marc Mlatawou and Toussaint Mlatawou. His goal for them was to learn to play solo and in a group. “First you sing, then drum, then dance, and then put it all together.” He stressed technique over strength, including the importance of keeping the hands flexible and not trying to play by muscle. He instructed in the different types of drums such as djembe and atsimevu, music styles such as bobobo, and how the drum communicates information. “It’s like the big drum asks the questions and the small drum gives the answers.”

Marc and Toussaint will use their drumming for the community. “The drumming is good for the community because it pulls the people together. It draws people in. If we are here and we start to sing, then we start to clap. Then someone will start to drum because you need drumming. Then someone will start to dance. It’s all very important.”

“When you play the drums, it helps you remember your country, your culture.” – Koffi Zoe Dogbevi